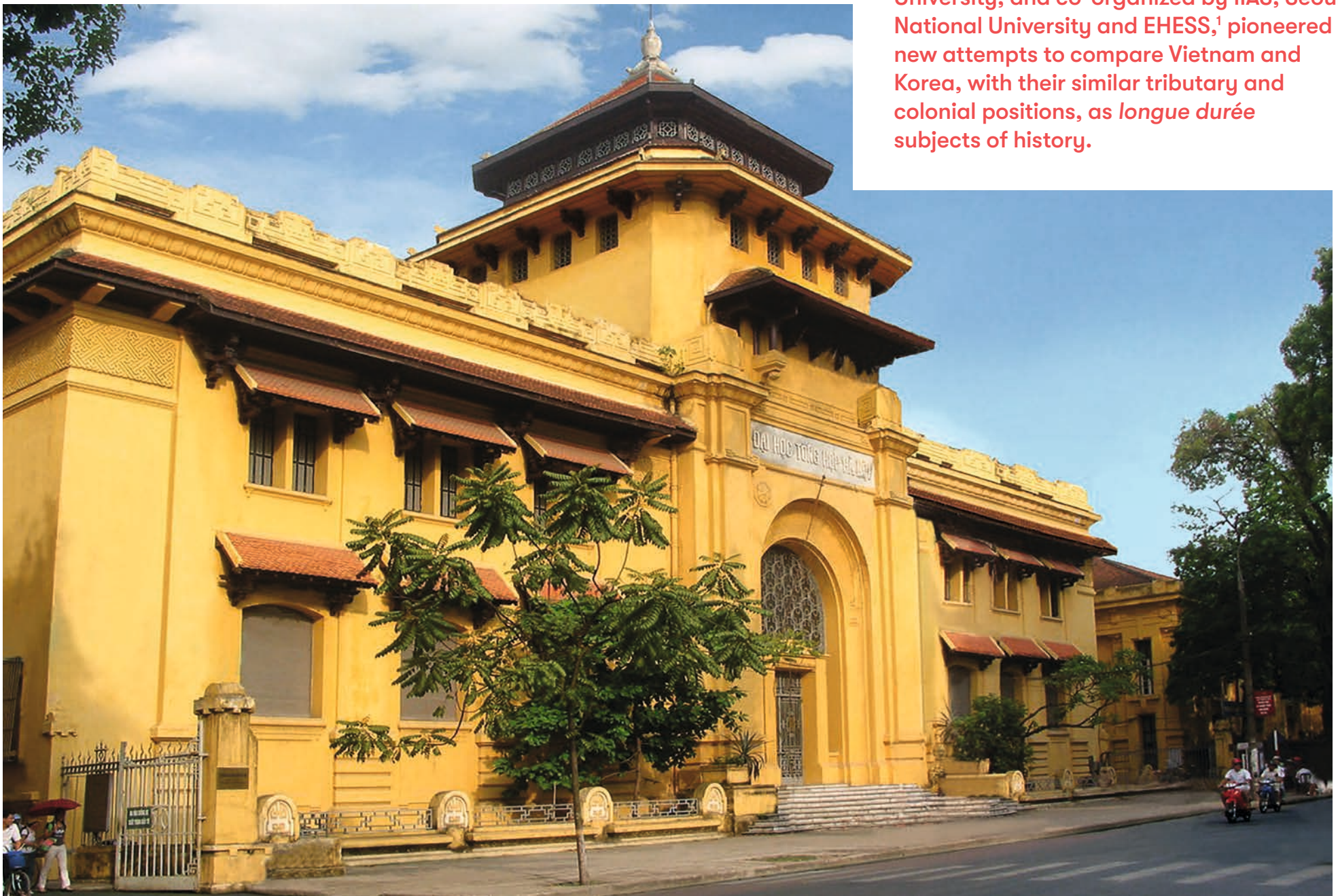


Vietnam and Korea in the *longue durée*

Negotiating tributary and colonial positions

Valérie Gelézeau and Phạm Văn Thuỳ

Vietnam and Korea are rarely compared *per se* in scholarly work, whether in the field of social sciences or that of area studies. Yet, obvious convergences in their recent histories are apparent: both are Asian countries where the Cold War was indeed hot, tragic and deadly; and both nations were situated at the core of the big divide of the 20th century between capitalism and socialism – Korea still divided, Vietnam reunified in 1975. A conference hosted in March 2016 in Hanoi at the Vietnam National University, and co-organized by IIAS, Seoul National University and EHESS,¹ pioneered new attempts to compare Vietnam and Korea, with their similar tributary and colonial positions, as *longue durée* subjects of history.



Vietnam National University.

Vietnam and Korea: *longue durée* convergence?

As great kingdoms in the pre-modern period, both countries developed strong political organizations and original civilizations, sometimes within and sometimes outside the Sinitic 'tributary' system. After the political fragmentation of the Antiquity, the first political unification by the Southern State of Silla (57 BC–668 AC) created the basis for a unified entity on the Korean peninsula: the Greater Silla (668–936). With the rise of the Koryŏ Kingdom (936–1492),² the whole peninsula continued as a powerful proto-state within the Chinese tributary system, along with indigenized Sinitic cultural traits found in the political and social order (from the State examination system, to the importance of Buddhism as the State religion). The Koryŏ Kingdom was followed by the Chosŏn Kingdom, which was centred on Seoul, the core capital of the peninsula (and a great world city today), and which was ruled by the Yi Dynasty, one of the longest in world history (1392–1910). As A. Delissen puts it, the equation

'Korea = one peninsula = one nation' takes root in the *longue durée* of the peninsula.

The earliest kingdoms in Vietnamese history had their roots in the Red River Valley of today's Northern Vietnam, namely Văn Lang and Âu Lạc. In 179 BC these proto-states were conquered by the Nan Yue (Southern Viet) kingdom that covered parts of northern Vietnam and southern provinces of modern China.³ As Nan Yue increasingly fell under Han influence, northern Vietnam was annexed into the Han Empire. Meanwhile, in Central Vietnam, the independent states of Lin Yi (192–758), precursor of Champa (758–1832), and Funan (1st–7th century) endured. Independence was restored in North Vietnam in the early 10th century after a millennium of Chinese domination. Like the Korean counterparts, however, the successive dynasties of independent Đại Việt (name of Vietnam for the periods from 1054 to 1400 and 1428 to 1804) carried out tributary relations with the Chinese Emperors and adopted various elements of Confucianism, such as the political structure, social order, education, and culture.⁴ Following the gradual territorial expansion of the Đại Việt Empire,

which annexed a large part of Champa in 1471 and established Vietnamese control over the Mekong Delta in the first half of the 19th century, Confucianism was also cultivated in Central and South Vietnam.⁵

As all countries in Asia, after the surge of the great Western powers in the region, and with the disruption of the Sinitic order, Korea and Vietnam experienced the vicissitudes of the modern and contemporary periods. They were confronted with colonial subjugation: Korea became a Japanese protectorate in 1905, and was a colony from 1910 to 1945. Vietnam was invaded by the French in 1858; but it took 26 years for the French to extend their control over the whole country. The unified Vietnam was then divided into three parts with different regimes: Tonkin (North Vietnam) and Annam (Central Vietnam) as French Protectorates, and Cochinchina (South Vietnam) as Proper Colony. These three regions were incorporated with Laos and Cambodia in the formation of French Indochina. The French colonial rule continued to exist in Vietnam until 1954.

International warfare and civil conflicts, resulting in the division of the two countries

and triggering diasporic projections, initiated an array of connections and parallels between the two countries' trajectories. Today, Vietnam and Korea continue to stand, albeit in divergent ways, at the edges of the two great ideological systems that shaped the 20th century: socialism and capitalism. Reunified Vietnam has entered post-communist-pro-capitalist State authoritarianism, which puts a strong emphasis on a socialist-oriented market economy. Korea remains divided between two models of state-hood and governance. On the one hand we have the DPRK (Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or 'North Korea'), an impoverished dictatorship banned from the international community for its nuclear development, which, after a profound crisis of its economic and social system, experiences again economic growth despite sanctions. On the other hand we have the ROK (Republic of Korea, or 'South Korea'), a rich (post) industrial and capitalist country democratized since the early 1990s, which inundates the global scene with its cultural productions (from K-pop to K-beauty).

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Beyond contemporary politics, the virtue of the 'comparative gesture'

In fact, most recent work taking Vietnam and Korea as common objects of comparison focus on the contemporary era, analysing more particularly the United States' policy towards Vietnam and Korea during the Cold War,⁶ or comparing both wars (the Korean war 1950-1953, the Vietnam war 1954-1974).⁷ A few works, which situate the perspective within the global approach of, for example, the colonial situation and more specifically the post-colonial wars, compare the Korean war, the Vietnam war and the Algerian war and their outcomes during the 20th century.⁸ But beyond the obvious recent and contemporary history, how is it possible to compare Vietnam and Korea, two major regional nations and societies in Asia, in the *longue durée* perspective?

Comparative studies are located at the heart of the humanities and social sciences,⁹ particularly area studies.¹⁰ In that field especially, implicit or explicit comparisons often determine certain conceptions of regional and sub-regional orders. In the field of social sciences, specifically area studies, isn't any reflexive method more or less comparative in its essence?¹¹ Jocelyne Dakhlia states: "Comparatism is anyways, in an explicit way or not, our permanent horizon of thought; consciously or unconsciously, we constantly transfer notions, problematics already tested in another context."¹²

In fact, area studies efficiently illustrate two very powerful tools of comparatism that avoid ethnocentrism; the first one is based on *spatial displacement* (from here to there): similar objects or categories are analysed in different socio-cultural contexts. The second is based on a *displacement of perspectives*: similar objects or categories may be analysed from different points of view (disciplines, or scientific culture). Inspired also by post-colonial studies, which profoundly contest the traditionally euro-centred schemes of thoughts, scholars have been calling for renewed approaches based on critical thinking and creative comparatism in order to reconsider classical and binary comparative geometries.¹³

For example, the study of East Asia is implicitly situated within a comparative approach to China and the Sinitic culture. What other "strange parallels"¹⁴ could possibly be operational to set a "comparative gesture"¹⁵ that would not be determined by usual 'sino-style' conceptions of Asia? How to trigger new connections and parallels in area studies?

The conference held in March 2016 attempted to initiate a deliberate by-pass of dominant geometries and meta-narratives, hoping that it would not only contribute to a renewed methodological framing of 'Asian studies', but also, by identifying new articulations beyond established approaches of global history, contribute to underscoring the intellectual merits – as well as limits – of comparisons as a method within the social sciences and humanities.

Confronting paradigms and parallel histories in Vietnam and Korea

Conceived as an exploratory exercise to identify points of connection, and in which scholars of Vietnam and Korea could examine their work and challenge their paradigms, the March 2016 conference was the first round of an ongoing project, historically grounded by a contemporary perspective situated within the larger Asia-global spectrum. This first round¹⁶ focused on the 'pre-modern' and 'colonial' periods (two conventionally agreed upon historiographies of the countries): how were the Korean and Vietnamese states and their civil societies – concepts shaped during the tributary system – formulated during the modernization period? During the two days of the conference (3-4 March 2016), 65 scholars coming from the five continents and of various trajectories and status interacted and presented their work in 16 different panels, which were regrouped according to a few main topics.

Three panels touched upon diplomacy and tributary systems, either from a general and trans-periodic approach (which could for example compare the Korean semi-tribute system – *kyorin* – with the Vietnamese system and their collapse), or from more specific periods. For example, one panel discussed the ritual displays (including cultural production such as poetry) in medieval diplomacy. A second group of panels examined cultural production in the larger sense, such as writing systems (both countries are known for having used the Chinese writing system to express their vernacular language, and created a common script), literature (the importance of book culture, and the circulation of the Classics, the new women and literature in both countries), but also religion (the spread of Buddhism in both countries) and spirituality (myths and folktales, the importance of geomancy). A few panels pertained to a more general basis of State formation in Vietnam and Korea (focusing on State construction either via cultural formation, or war; or discussing how economy and trade shaped the national structures). A significant number of panels (five, that is about a third of the papers) focused on the colonial period and analysed various aspects of it: from land and territorial management, to political issues such as school systems, and more generally nationalism, and, of course, cultural issues such as visual art or music.

Finally, a panel entitled 'Urban development of the city of Kaesŏng, from the Koryŏ period till the 20th century in DPR Korea' illustrated the effort of this conference to go beyond South-centric views of the long history of Korea. Although they did not attend the conference, the voice of North Korean scholars was also present thanks to this panel, which presented an archaeological scientific cooperation between the EFEO (École française d'Extrême-Orient) and the DPRK National Authority for the Protection of Cultural Heritage.

This Focus section on Vietnam and Korea

This instalment of the Focus presents a selection of a few excellent papers presented at the conference. Nguyễn Nhật Linh (Vietnam National University), analyses Chosŏn's understanding of Ming-Đại Việt relations and shows how the comparison of tributary positions and diplomatic strategies were made by Vietnam and Korea themselves, through the interface of the Ming tributary missions. At the turn of the 14th century, the founders of the Chosŏn Kingdom secured their dynastic transition, and sought legitimation from the Ming while looking at the problematic transition happening at the same time in Đại Việt, and the war with the Ming (1406-1407). The early Yi Kings' diplomacy was thus oriented to avoid the same situation, and hold Đại Việt's example as a cautionary tale, which

eventually led Chosŏn to a relatively peaceful and stable relationship with the Ming.

Momoki Shiro (Osaka University) reconsiders categories of land and taxation systems during the successive periods of Lý-Trần dynasties (11th-14th century) in Đại Việt. A fruitful comparison with the taxation system in Korea during the medieval Koryŏ Kingdom points out a certain privatization of commoners' fields, which created in Vietnam a fractionation of arable land in the Northern/Central regions. The author forms the hypothesis that, combined with the rapid demographic growth of the period, this situation played a role in the collapse of the Đại Việt state at the end of the 14th century.

Ho Tai Hue-Tam (Harvard University) delivers here a condensed version of her fascinating keynote speech, also touching upon diplomatic missions. The celebrated exchange of poems between two famous literati, Phùng Khắc Khoan and Yi Su-gwang (16th century), illustrates very well not only the transnational cultural encounters that occurred during the tributary missions to China thanks to the use of classical Chinese (*wenyan*), but also and by contrast, the parallels found between the introduction of both vernacular common writing systems, the *chữ nôm* in Vietnam and the *hunmin jeongeum* in Korea.

In his paper describing the complex networks of Japan's international trade during the isolationist Tokugawa period (17th and 18th centuries), Ryuto Shimada (The University of Tokyo) shows the important connector role played by Chinese junk merchants, and also by the Dutch East India Company. While trade was the main focus of Japan's international relation with Vietnam and China at the time, by contrast the relations with Korea included diplomatic missions, in the sensitive context of the post-Japanese invasion of Korea (late 16th century).

Youn Dae-young (Sogang University) examines the introduction of so-called 'new books' in Vietnam, while reform ideas and revolutionary thinking were disseminated by great figures such as Phan Bội Châu (famous revolutionary leader) and Lương Văn Can (founder of the Tonkin Free School). In Vietnam, the relatively stable presence of Chinese emigrants, the extension of the influence of Sun Yatsen into Indochina and the uprisings that shook South China in the early years of the 1900s triggered rebellions that were more numerous and violent than in Korea.

In the final paper of this issue, John D. Phan (Columbia University) elaborates on the topic of language. He studies a 1919 issue of *Nam Phong* [Southern Wind], a very important intellectual journal of the time, and analyses Phạm Quỳnh's (chief editor of *Nam Phong*, monarchist and pro-colonial) defence of the use of the Vietnamese language and the literati Phạm Huy-hồ's discussion on Chinese script, which denationalizes the Chinese script. John D. Phan concludes comparatively that the strikingly similar role of literary Chinese

language in precolonial Vietnamese and Korean societies strongly suggests that parallel processes of rebranding the role and nature of language in national identity occurred, not only in the critical moment of late 19th and early 20th century colonisation, but potentially multiple times throughout history.

The next Korea-Vietnam conference will be held at Seoul National University, on 1-2 June 2018. We hope it will be as successful as the 2016 conference in Hanoi!

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Notes

- 1 Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris, France.
- 2 In all the articles of this Focus section, the McCune-Reischauer system has been used to Romanize the Korean; the vernacular order for a person's name has been kept (name, first name). The names of Vietnamese persons and places are also written in vernacular order (family name, middle name and first name) and the Romanized alphabet (*Quốc Ngữ*; lit.: national language), except for those which have been widely internationalized.
- 3 Taylor, K.W. 2013. *A History of the Vietnamese*. Cambridge University Press, p.14.
- 4 See Woodside, A.B. 1971. *Vietnam and the Chinese Model: A Comparative Study of Vietnamese and Chinese Government in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*. Harvard University Press. See also the work by Kwon Heonik (author of *Ghosts of War in Vietnam*, Cambridge University Press, 2013).
- 5 See Choi Byung Wook. 2004. *Southern Vietnam Under the Reign of Ming Mạng (1820-1841): Central Policies and Local Response*. Cornell University Press.
- 6 Bragg, C. 2006. *Vietnam, Korea, and US Foreign Policy: 1945-75*. London: Heinemann.
- 7 See for example the article by Robinson, L.S. 2011. 'Did Stalemate Equal Victory? From the Korean to the Vietnam Wars', *American Diplomacy*. Available from the UNC-Chapel Hill website: <https://tinyurl.com/amdipstalemate> (last consulted 26 January 2018).
- 8 See for example Delissen, A. 2009. 'War memories of the periphery: bombastic commemorations in Korea, Vietnam and Algeria', in Lee Jae-Won (ed.) *Kieok-kwa cheonjaeng [Memory and War]*. Seoul: Humanist, pp.51-73. See also: Woodside, A. 2001. *Lost Modernities. China, Korea, Vietnam and the Hazards of History*. Harvard University Press.
- 9 Détienné, M. 2000. *Comparer l'incomparable [Compare the incomparable]*. Paris: Seuil; Werner, M. & Zimmermann, B. (eds.) 2004. *De la comparaison à l'histoire croisée*. Paris: Seuil.
- 10 Liebermann, V. 2009. *Strange Parallels : Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830*. Cambridge University Press.
- 11 Gelézeau, V. 2012. 'La Corée dans les sciences sociales. Les géométries de la comparaison à l'épreuve d'un objet dédoublé' [Korea in social science: a divided object beyond geometries of comparisons], in Rémaud, O., Schaub, J-F, & Thireau, I. (eds.) *Faire des sciences sociales [Practicing social sciences]*, Vol. 3 *Comparer [To compare]*. Paris: EHESS editions, pp.255-284.
- 12 Dakhlia, J. 2001. 'La "culture nébuleuse" ou l'Islam à l'épreuve de la comparaison' [The 'nebula culture' or Islam challenged by the comparative method], *Annales SHS* 56(6):1181
- 13 For example, in urban geography Jennifer Robinson criticizes the simplistic and binary opposition between developed/third world cities; socialist/capitalist cities; European cities/others, etc.: Robinson, J. 2011. 'Cities in a world of cities: the comparative gesture', *International Journal of Regional and Urban Research* 35(1):1-23.
- 14 Liebermann, V. 2009. *Strange parallels. Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830*. Cambridge University Press.
- 15 Robinson, J. 2011 (cited in note 13).
- 16 The second one is being held at Seoul National University in June 2018, and will focus more on contemporary issues.



Phùng Khắc Khoan (1528-1613). Image Wikimedia Commons.